DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 461 459 RC 023 288

AUTHOR Johns, S.; Kilpatrick, S.; Mulford, B.; Falk, I.
TITLE Taking the Lead: The Role of Rural Schools in Community Development.
SPONS AGENCY Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, Barton (Australia).
PUB DATE 2000-09-00
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Australian Council for Educational Administration (Hobart, Australia, September 9-12, 2000). Contains small print.
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.acea.edu.au/elo/newsletters/acea_2000/34.html.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *Change Strategies; Community Cooperation; *Community Development; Community Involvement; Community Leaders; Foreign Countries; Participative Decision Making; *Rural Schools; *School Community Relationship; *School Role; *Social Capital; Social Networks
IDENTIFIERS Australia

ABSTRACT

A study examining school contributions to community development collected data from five rural Australian communities via interviews with school and community members, documentation from school and community sources, and observation. Preliminary findings from two communities suggest that in both, the school was a key player in building and maintaining relationships. In one community, the school was the only central meeting place for community members. Activities organized by, or in conjunction with, the school promoted social cohesion and inclusiveness throughout the community. An online access center at the school provided community members access to a wide variety of information and a place to exchange ideas. There was a high level of community involvement in school decision making, which contributed to community ownership of the school. This involvement was enhanced by a school philosophy that welcomes community involvement and a leadership process based on building trust and mutual respect between school staff and community members. In the other community, the school has played a key role in integrating youth into the community through work-based learning, a cadet scheme, and a volunteer reading program using retirees as tutors. In both sites, schools have helped build social capital by fostering close partnerships with their communities, developing cooperation, communication, and trust. School contributions have been maximized by leadership processes with a strong focus on building relationships across community sectors. (Contains 28 references.) (TD)

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TAKING THE LEAD: THE ROLE OF RURAL SCHOOLS IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

There is growing pressure on schools, particularly in rural and regional Australia, to forge closer linkages with their communities, in order to better utilise resources and to ensure the survival and sustainability of both school and community in a rapidly changing world. School-community partnerships which are likely to be both effective and sustainable need time to develop, as both school and community find common ground in terms of shared values and visions. Whilst external support and funding is often an important ingredient in 'seeding' school-community linkages, it must be supplemented with a strong community support base and a sense of community ownership of the school and its programs. It seems likely that school-community linkages which are imposed from above, driven externally by policy or funding requirements, rather than developed over time to reflect school and community needs and goals, may be less effective and may not ultimately be sustainable. This paper reports preliminary findings in relation to the school-community linkages in two rural case study sites. In both communities the findings suggest that the school plays a role in building social capital, by developing community self-confidence, trust and networks, and by promoting shared visions and values. In so doing, the school contributes to community development by fostering social, civic and economic wellbeing. There us evidence that leadership processes, with a strong focus on relationship building across community sectors, are a critical factor in maximising the extent and effectiveness of the school-community linkage in both sites.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents preliminary findings from a work-in-progress, which examines the nature and extent of the contribution of the school to community development in two rural communities, and the influence of leadership on the school-community linkage. The study is timely, given the current focus by State and Commonwealth Education authorities on promoting partnerships between schools and communities, coupled with initiatives from State and Commonwealth Governments designed to encourage rural communities to play a proactive role in contributing to their development and sustainability. It also echoes the current reinvestigation of the role of the school in community development at an international level (see, for example, Driscoll & Kerchner, 1999; Schorr, 1997).

BACKGROUND

Background to school contribution to communities

Research suggests that the sustainability of rural communities is closely linked to the strength of their internal and external linkages and relationships (Lane & Dorfman, 1997). Through these relationships and the interactions that ensue stores of social capital are built. Social capital impacts on the wellbeing of a community by facilitating its social, civic and economic development (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000). Social capital includes networks and formal and informal procedures for getting things done, shared norms (or values), trust, and the ability and willingness of community members to act for the benefit of the community. This ability and willingness to act requires a level of self-confidence and self-esteem and the presence of skills in working together, including leadership skills. Social capital assists community members to share their knowledge, skills and other resources, and so assists members to act together for the benefit of the community. Social capital assists communities to manage change (Lane & Dorfman, 1997).

In many rural communities schools are one of the few, if not the only major institution. Schools have both the resources and the opportunities to make a significant contribution to their community's development by working in partnership with the community. However, the concept of partnership in cementing school to community is only partially understood. Dorsch (1988) concludes that it takes time – time for trust to develop, courage to grow, communication to become open, commitment to develop, and vision to emerge.

The time taken to develop sustainable partnerships between school and community will enrich both school and community well into the future. Schools which have worked at developing active relationships with their communities have been able to provide enhanced and more meaningful earning experiences for their students (Nelson, 1990). Outcomes for youth, and for the future of the community, are far more extensive than in the absence of such relationships, encompassing a variety of economic (Johns, Kilpatrick, Falk & Mulford 2000a & b; Sederberg cited in Salant & Waller, 1998; Glen, Cupitt & Fairley, 1992) and social benefits (Johns et al., 2000a & b; Lane & Dorfman, 1997; Miller, 1995).

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In recent years a number of studies have focused on the nature of school-community partnerships, particularly from a North American perspective. For example, Miller (1995) uses a social capital framework to describe the community development function of schools in several rural towns in north western USA. He categorises these functions into three areas: school as a community centre, community as curriculum, and school-based enterprise. What is lacking, however, is research that documents the tangible outcomes of schools' contributions to community development (Salant & Waller, 1998). The current study is an attempt to document these contributions.

The current study also seeks to identify those factors which influence the effectiveness of the school-community partnership. Research suggests that leadership within school and community is a critical determinant of effective school-community partnerships (Kilpatrick, Bell & Kilpatrick, 2000; Johns et al., 2000a; Miller, 1998; Lane & Dorfman, 1997). In this study leadership is defined as a process which focuses on relationship building across community sectors (Peirce & Johnson, 1997). The strength of this process is in 'networks of responsibility drawn from all segments coming together to create a wholeness that incorporates diversity' (Peirce & Johnson, 1997: 7). Research indicates that interactions which foster relationships across role boundaries are likely to contribute to the community's stores of social capital, and to community sustainability (Falk & Mulford, forthcoming; Lane & Dorfman, 1997). Other factors which influence the effectiveness of schools in rural communities include the perception of education and the school system in the community and the level of communication between school and community (Combs & Bailey, 1992); development of a strong community support base for the school (Miller, 1995); and community participation in school decisionmaking (Glen et al., 1992). The literature suggests that community participation within the school provides links to the diversity of community opinion (Knight, 1995) which, in turn, is likely to facilitate positive perceptions of education and two-way communication between school and community. Community participation in the school also promotes a sense of community ownership of the school, which is a prerequisite for change (Murphy & Beck, 1995).

On the other hand, an array of often unresolved professional, managerial and organisational issues can act as barriers to success. Dilemmas of professional turf, resistance to change, cross-agency competition, and socio-cultural gaps between providers and recipients are among key constraints (White & Wehlage, 1995; Crowson & Boyd, 1993). These influences will vary from school to school, and from community to community. Research into the effectiveness of school-community partnerships need to be mindful of both positive and negative influences and the context in which they occur.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research uses a case study methodology. The paper reports work-in-progress, so preliminary findings only are presented from two of the five rural case study sites: Margaret River (Western Australia) and Meander (Tasmania). Data were collected using three techniques: semi-structured interviews with a variety of school and wider community members; written documentation from school and community sources, and observation, allowing for triangulation of data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using a purposive sampling strategy, interviews were conducted with a variety of community members, as well as school staff, students and parents. The resulting data are both rich and intensive, enhancing their transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

THE COMMUNITIES AND THEIR SCHOOLS

Meander1

Meander is a small village of 258 people (ABS, 1996) in the central north of Tasmania. It is 15 km from the rural centre of Deloraine with a population of 2168 (ABS, 1996). The site has a primary school, with a relatively stable enrolment of 89 students from Kindergarten to Grade 6, eight teaching staff and five non-teaching staff. The school also houses a community on -line access centre which was established in 1998. Meander's main industries are agriculture, including dairying, beef, sheep, cropping, and timber. During the 1970s and 1980s there was a large influx into the Meander area of people seeking an alternative lifestyle. This boost to the population brought different skills with a strong emphasis on music and the arts, and different attitudes to the established industries, especially forestry operations. Tourism and the arts have lately played a greater cultural and economic role in the region. Despite these opportunities, the unemployment rate within the region, at 12.6% (ABS, 1996), is relatively high.

Margaret River

This site in the south west of Western Australia includes the town of Margaret River with a population estimated at 4000 and continuing to grow, and several smaller communities. There are five Government and three private schools in the region. This paper focuses on the only high school, Margaret River Senior High School, with an enrolment of 600 students from Years 8 to 12, 50 teaching staff and 40 non-teaching staff. The area has a strong economy, based largely on its flourishing viticulture and tourism industries, as well as dairy farming. Employment is available in the viticulture and tourism industries, but is likely to be casual and seasonal. More permanent employment opportunities are provided by the school, public service and small business sectors. There is unemployment in the region, particularly amongst younger people, at a rate of 9.06% (ABS, 1996). Like Meander, over the past two decades a number of people seeking alternative lifestyles have been attracted to the area,

resulting in a diverse population in terms of backgrounds, lifestyles and values.

RESULTS

Meander

For several decades the school has enjoyed a close relationship with the community, playing an important role as a community centre. In particular, the school plays a major role in bringing together groups with differing lifestyles and values for the good of the community. The role of the school in developing shared values in the wider community, including valuing diversity and respect for differences, is evidenced in the wide variety of parent/community members and groups whose paths cross as they share their skills and knowledge within the school:

> Well I think Meander is quite lucky because there's a lot ... more parents able to come and help at the school and have their input to the school, fairly diverse sort of backgrounds there and parents, so there's a lot of different cultures ... so I think that's sort of important that the students come to recognise ... what different people can offer in the community and just the way people stand in the community. (Parent, formal school participation)

The school has both a Parents and Friends (P & F) group and a School Council. Whilst there has traditionally been a high level of community involvement in fundraising and other P & F activities over the years, more parents are now choosing to participate in decisionmaking related to curriculum and other policy areas. This is evidence of willingness to use knowledge and skills on behalf of the community. Although many believe that the P & F continues to play an important social role in the community, some are concerned that with the advent of the School Council the importance of the P & F has been diminished, restricting the level of involvement of some community members in the school.

An event that had a significant impact on parental participation in school decisionmaking was the threatened closure of the school in the 1980s, due to dwindling enrolments. This was an important vehicle for uniting the diverse groups within the community and capitalising on the skills, experience and extensive networks of some community members:

> But the parents all sort of rallied and wrote submissions ... because there was a lot of people who were used to writing submissions ... on environmental issues ... the school was saved and one of the provisos was that the school had to establish a School Council. Now we were sort of working towards [that] ... and we ended up more formalising things and people felt more confident in coming and have a say. (School staff member)

Relationships within the school, and between school and community are based on equality, mutual trust and respect rather than formal, hierarchical organisational structures. The community and school pride themselves on well understood procedures for getting things done. Leadership processes which allow them to find their own solutions to problems and concerns are central to these procedures:

> And I suppose this community is used to not being told what to do ... whichever side you come from ... whereas if they are given a broad framework and say well these are some options you talk about it and come up with it, they are far more receptive ... (School staff member)

As well as improved learning outcomes for students, other key outcomes of community involvement (and particularly community participation) in the school were identified, including increased self-esteem and satisfaction of community members whose skills and talents are recognised and valued, as well as the grooming of new community leaders. The following ex-parent, who had participated formally in the school for a number of years, explains how he was able to act on behalf of the community in other areas:

> ... so I became super involved because of that, that's what ... actually got me involved I suppose, more into community politics and because you're actually having to take a stand for the community then people ... expected you to take a stand on other issues as well, plus it gave you the experience dealing with bureaucrats and ... dealing with ... different people from the community ...

The school, through its links with the on-line access centre, is playing an important role in helping the local community to embrace and manage change. The initiator and coordinator of the centre is a parent of the school, a part-time staff member and a member of the School Council. As well as providing technical support, the coordinator acts in the role of mediator of change, in facilitating communication between the different groups. With the decline in traditional rural industry, options such as organic farming, working from home using the Internet, as well as arts and tourism, are being explored. Both the technical infrastructure of the on-line centre, as well as the

knowledge of the coordinator and shared knowledge gained from use of the on-line centre, are assisting the community to work together in this important transition:

> ... when people face change, barriers always go up ... it's just a natural reaction to something they don't understand or they don't want to ... but I think the access centre ... actually helped people come to something new and different at their own pace and at their own time ... (On-line access centre coordinator)

An important need that the on-line centre meets is that of a central meeting place for community groups. Whilst the school has traditionally been a meeting place for parents, it is now a meeting place for a wider group of community members, as people come together to learn and to share their knowledge and skills.

Margaret River

Since becoming a senior high school in 1995, Margaret River Senior High School, in collaboration with key sectors of the community, has played a significant role in breaking down the barriers between youth and adults, and in reintegrating a number of youth back into their community. This has come about as part of a carefully planned strategy by school leaders:

> there is a very clear policy on the part of [the Principal] and backed up by his very able deputies, that this school must interact with its community and must welcome its community and must lead its community ... (Parent, formal school participation)

The school worked hard at developing a strong relationship with the community, first through the Parents and Citizens (P & C), its parent body. This relationship was built on shared vision and mutual respect:

> the P and C is very closely aligned with the school administration, there's a lot of mutual respect, we don't always agree, we've had some very strong differences but we respect each other ... I think it comes down to a vision thing, there's no doubt that there is a sense of shared vision that the school is very important in this community and of course hence the reciprocal. (Parent, formal school participation)

Parental involvement in both school and other community activities is seen as a vehicle for communication within the community, and for gaining support for subsequent school-community initiatives. The following parent leader, who also has a leadership role in a number of community organisations, explains how he uses his position to enhance the school-community partnership by developing an understanding of what each has to offer the other:

> ... the bitterest of enemies or the most opposed of positions can come to understand each other if there is communication so I like to think that if we hammer the communication then there will be a community wanting to get involved with the school and the school wanting to get involved with the community.

A number of key school-community links were developed from the mid 1990s onwards, aimed at providing youth with enriched curricular and extra curricular choices. Initiatives include a Vocational Education and Training (VET) in schools program consisting of structured work-based learning, where senior students undertake 120 hours of work placements in the community per year; a State Emergency Services Cadet scheme which links youth with the region's extensive voluntary services sector; and a volunteer reading scheme involving retired community members as tutors/mentors to students with reading difficulties.

Access to external support and funding, as well as community involvement in planning and developing the programs, were key factors in the later success and sustainability of both the structured work-based learning and cadet programs.

With the introduction of Years 11 and 12 into the school in 1995, and the increased school-community linkages, came a number of benefits for both youth and community members, including increased school retention rates; increased academic achievement; greater involvement of young people in community activities; and increased parental involvement in the school. Other outcomes included increased self-confidence and self-esteem of youth, and the acquisition of skills and knowledge in relation to the workplace and voluntary organisations. In particular, these initiatives assisted youth to build relationships with community members and to access networks across a variety of community sectors. Speaking about the benefits of participation in structured work-based learning, a Year 11 student notes the following:

> ... I think it does a lot for your personality, getting out and doing work experience ... I think mostly I'm grateful that I actually made sort of friends out of more adults in the community that I never would have met otherwise.

There were also benefits for community members, including increased feelings of self-confidence and self-esteem

and a sense of being needed and valued within the community. The following retired community member explains the benefits of being involved in the school's volunteer reading program:

> I just absolutely love it, you know I really love this boy so much and the nice thing is that I think he might think I'm alright, so you know it's a very satisfying thing, the contact ... and I felt attracted to the idea of being involved in the community ... in something that I felt confident I could do ...

The exposure of youth to broad sectors of the community they might not otherwise have had dealings with, brought about a change in community attitudes towards youth, and youth attitudes towards adults. There has been a gradual building of intergenerational trust as older community members now see that youth can act for the benefit of the community.

DISCUSSION

The leadership role of schools in rural communities

The findings suggest that the school occupies a central position in both communities, as a key player in building and maintaining relationships. The schools build self-confidence in both community members as well as students, build trust among groups, build and use networks, and promote shared visions and values in their communities. Self-confidence, trust, networks and shared visions and values are elements of social capital. Social capital contributes to social, civic and economic wellbeing (Falk & Kilpatrick, 2000), and can be seen as an important component of community development.

The ways in which each school helps to build social capital within its community is examined in the following sections.

Meander

In Meander, the school is the community centre, providing the only central meeting place for community members, as well as resources and opportunities for community interaction (Miller, 1995). Much of the social life of the community comes from activities organised by, or in conjunction with, the school. These activities promote social cohesion and inclusiveness through which 'all residents find access to community "associational life"' (Bryant & Grady, 1990: 24).

The school represents stability in the face of the rapid changes occurring (Glen et al., 1992), particularly in the rural industry. It is an important symbol of collective identity (Reynolds, 1995) and community pride, illustrated by the collective community action which saved the school from threatened closure in the 1980s. In particular, the school plays an important role in bringing together community groups with differing values and attitudes on neutral ground. In a region in which there has been much heated debate over environmental issues, the school has steered a neutral path and has done much to facilitate dialogue as a first step in resolving differences and developing shared values that value difference.

More recently, with the introduction of the on-line access centre which is located within the school, the school is playing an important role in assisting local farm businesses to manage changes to their industry. These changes have been brought about by a number of factors, including decline in traditional markets and deregulation of the dairy industry. As a central meeting place, opportunities occur for the exchange of ideas with others, while the on-line access centre provides the technical infrastructure for community members to access a wide variety of information sources worldwide. The mediating role of the on-line access centre coordinator, who represents both the school and the community, is central to this change process. These opportunities for learning are seen as essential if farm businesses within the region are to remain viable (Anderson, 1997).

One of the strengths of the Meander Primary School is the level of community involvement in the school, and community participation in school decisionmaking, which has contributed to community ownership of the school (Murphy & Beck, 1995). This involvement is enhanced by a school philosophy which celebrates diversity and welcomes community input, a leadership process based on building relationships of trust and mutual respect between school staff and community members, and a pool of community members with the ability and desire to actively involve themselves in school activities. Community involvement and participation has provided students with an enriched curriculum, strong in music and the arts. For community members, the benefits include a sense of satisfaction and increased self-esteem as their skills and talents are utilised and valued by others. In addition, skills learnt through participation in school decisionmaking have enabled some community members to undertake leadership roles within the wider community. The enhancement of community leadership through school involvement is confirmed by other researchers (for example, Glen et al., 1992).

To summarise, the Meander Primary School contributes to social and economic wellbeing in the community by facilitating communication and by fostering community leadership development. By encouraging dialogue between

diverse community groups, the school is impacting on the way in which the community deals with conflict and manages change.

Margaret River

One of the key contributions of the Margaret River Senior High School to its community is the role it has played in reintegrating youth back into the community. Today young people display a new-found confidence and ability to contribute to community planning and decisionmaking, as well as having access to networks that facilitate their participation in the social and working life of the community. The number of young people remaining in the community and gaining employment since has also increased. The vehicles for this reintegration of youth into their community have been a number of carefully planned, collaborative school-community initiatives, including structured work-based learning, a cadet scheme, and a volunteer reading program using retired citizens as tutors/mentors. This use of the community as curriculum (Miller, 1995) not only provides '[m]eaningful education opportunities [but fosters] youth development, retention and participation [which] are characteristics of healthy communities' (Kenyon, 1999b: 6).

As a result of the school-community initiatives, youth have gained a greater sense of identity and belonging. These findings are consistent with research into the contributions of Vocational Education and Training in regional and rural Australia, which identifies increased sense of identity, belonging and self-efficacy amongst youth, as well as the retention of youth in their communities, as key outcomes of VET-in-schools programs (CRLRA, 2000). Relationships have been formed with a variety of community groups, including business, industry, local government, service clubs, voluntary services, and the elderly. Such links, which cross role boundaries, have been found to increase intergenerational trust and contribute to sustainable community development (Lane & Dorfman, 1997). Opportunities for employment, self-employment and voluntary community service have been increased for youth who '... are now better equipped with increased skills and knowledge relevant to their community; these skills and knowledge have developed as youth are exposed to and develop their own networks across community sectors' (Johns et al., 2000b: 7).

Community benefits of the school-community partnership include increased satisfaction, and self-esteem of community members involved in structured work-based learning, the cadets and the reading volunteer scheme as their skills and knowledge are utilised as a valued resource. Retired citizens also reported an increased sense of purpose and belonging in the community. A similar outcome was reported in research looking at the contributions of Vocational Education and Training in rural and regional Australia (CRLRA, 2000). In addition, through its cadet program, the school is contributing to the voluntary sector by raising youth awareness of the importance of volunteerism in small communities. This contribution is significant in that a healthy volunteer sector is an important component of community development (Kenyon, 1999a).

To summarise, the school has contributed to social and economic wellbeing in the community by helping to build community capacity, particularly amongst youth, in terms of skills, self-confidence, networks, and job readiness and awareness. The capacity building role of the Margaret River Senior High School is similar to the capacity-building role of Vocational Education and Training, identified in recent research (CRLRA, 2000).

CONCLUSION

It can be tentatively concluded that, in both sites, the school helped to build social capital within the community by fostering interaction. Through close partnerships with their communities, the schools played a major role in developing cooperation, communication and trust, important building blocks for community development. In both sites the schools' contribution to their communities have been maximised by leadership processes with a strong focus on building relationships across community sectors. As there are likely to be implications for leadership development programs for both school and community leaders, further research into the effects of leadership, and other influencing factors, is recommended.

ENDNOTE

1This site profile prepared by Libby Prescott, Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia, University of Tasmania.

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